DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 478 CS 214 603

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TITLE (En)Countering the Opposition: Defending Pluralistic Pedagogies in a Healthy Atmosphere of Conflict.
PUB DATE 12 Feb 94
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Baylor University Academic and Literary Conference (Waco, TX, February 12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Pluralism; *Curriculum Development; *Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; *Politics of Education; Traditionalism
IDENTIFIERS Curriculum Reconceptualists; *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

The many movements toward a multicultural approach to education have met with resistance from various quarters. A predominant opposing view is that tampering with the status quo is tantamount to inviting educational disaster across the nation. When education becomes more accessible, the argument implies, it is letting people down. Two recent newspaper editorials, written by Cal Thomas and Georgie Anne Geyer illustrate the fallacies in this line of attack. Thomas's reasoning is based on the assumption that truth is universal; there are not different ways of living so much as wrong and right ones. While more reasonable than Thomas, Geyer characterizes multiculturalism as an effort divide up the country into "bartering groups orchestrated by activists and advocates who know what is best for everybody." Well-known writers such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Lynne V. Cheney similarly posit untenable arguments against pluralism and student-centered pedagogues. In his misguided treatment of American history, Schlesinger subscribes to the "one grand narrative" version of history in which all cultures have combined peacefully for two centuries and have only encountered difficulties recently. In taking to task America's universities, Cheney states that "45% of college students graduate without taking a course in American or English literature." Cheney argues that "telling the truth" will dispel the notion that truth is a social construct and consequently return universities to their initial and proper goal--uncovering truth without any influence of a political agenda. (Contains 15 references.) (TB)

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Baylor University Academic and Literary Conference
12 February 1994

(En)Countering the Opposition: Defending Pluralistic Pedagogies in a Healthy Atmosphere of Conflict

> Public schools have been invaded and captured by an alien philosophy. With their emphasis on "multiculturalism," rewriting history, and "alternative lifestyles," they are hothouses in which young seedlings are converted into towering liberal oaks. (Thomas 25)

The many movements toward a multicultural approach to education have met with resistance from various quarters. A predominant opposing view is that tampering with the status quo is tantamount to inviting educational disaster across the nation. Making the educational process available to everyone is a widely recognized trait of democracy because education is considered the gateway to success in the American marketplace. However, making the educational process more reflective of the experiences of most Americans seems to signal a surrender in the fight to provide learning for the masses. In other words, the appropriate function of education, so the story goes, is to allow a means of approach for all citizens so that these citizens may operate productively within society. But if this essentialist notion of education were itself to transfigure in order to become more accessible, more palatable, to those diverse citizens, then somehow education has let us down; it is no longer a worthy fruit to be plucked by those who follow the rules of previous generations. These sentiments are shared by many taxpayers who feel that they are not receiving a fair return for their mandatory investment; and these sentiments are periodically articulated for the public by various newspaper columnists. Writers such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Lynne V. Cheney have also stoked the fires of discontent with their books outlining plans to return to "traditional" educational materials and methods. Many of these voices of opposition denounce multiculturalism roundly as if it were a monolithic concept, having only one agenda and one organized driving force. Those who appreciate the benefits of a pluralistic pedagogy must examine the several points offered by the opposing voices and evaluate them as critically as students should evaluate information presented to them in their classrooms. It is through conflict such as this, according to Gerald Graff (Professing, 3) that we invigorate the objects of

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our inquiry--in this case, a pluralistic pedagogy--and establish a dialogue among the texts in a multicultural context.

Thomas's contention above centers on the view of truth as universal and, thus, attainable through a series of actions. He sets off the terms "multiculturalism" and "alternative lifestyles" with quotation marks as if to say, it seems, that there are no such concepts. He may have trouble reconciling these signifiers with his own perception of the signified; in other words, "multiculturalism" means something less than the consideration of diverse ethnic groups in the United States, and there are no "alternate lifestyles" but right and wrong ones. But these are simply conjecture; they serve only to call attention to Thomas's distinguishing these particular terms with punctuation. Curiously, though, Thomas does not distinguish "rewriting history" with any such marks, and he leaves the impression that, conversely, there can be only one interpretation of rewriting history: it is part of that nefarious alien philosophy to which he alludes in the previous sentence. In keeping with the view that there is but one truth, a truth to be discovered, Thomas holds to the belief that there is likewise only one history. He proposes that conservatives must abandon public schools and take it upon themselves to "educate their children with their own world view," a world view buoyed by "principles from the Old and New Testaments" and "traditional values" (25). Thomas cites Allan Bloom in expressing his dispair, disgust really, that students enter higher education with woefully inadequate instruction in their political heritage, as though there is one perception of political heritage that can be, or has been, passed down to students in their civics books. These remarks garner the support of many who worry that history taught differently from the way they learned it is somehow inferior and, thus, dishonest. That there are diverse interpretations of Columbus's landing in the Americas or of America's involvement in either of the World Wars solicits cries of "crisis" among those who feel comfortable with the "official version" of history because that version seems in synchronization with their own backgrounds and personal convictions. Rather than consider that there are many different perspectives of the past, just as there are many different perspectives of the present, those aghast at a "revisionist" history seem to feel a sense of security in their official version, even though that version may fail to take into account the experiences of one or several groups of people.

But relying on Thomas's one editorial as the voice of opposition invites accusations not only of utilizing the strawperson fallacy but also of generalizing

that opposition. Not all those who have expressed concern about the methods of promoting multiculturalism in public education worry that such a gesture will result in a crisis. Some, however, worry that multiculturalism serves as an excuse for irrational behavior. Georgie Anne Geyer, who has traveled extensively, makes such a point when she laments the violence that disrupted the parade celebrating the Dallas Cowboys' 1993 Super Bowl victory. She characterizes multiculturalism as a move to celebrate plurality by separating diverse groups of people:

> In truth, multiculturalism, as we see it in public and academic life today, is exactly the opposite of a search for truth. Multiculturalism already knows. It knows that this country should be divided up into bartering groups orchestrated by activists and advocates who know what is best for everybody (and particularly their own careers). (A17)

Geyer sees the movements toward plurality as manipulated by individuals who appreciate the potential to enhance their own power. Certainly there are a number of individuals who promote their own interests and egos when they take up the cause of a particular group and pretend to speak for the best interests of that group. But it is unfair for Geyer to claim, or even to imply, that "multiculturalism," painted in broad strokes, is borne of deception. Many perceive the celebration of diverse ethnic groups as a gesture of multiculturalism, but such a gesture does not automatically initiate divisiveness. Recognition of ethnic groups not previously noted by the majority of Americans serves to bring to the center those groups that have been confined to the margins. However, the center should yield; otherwise, the exclusive sense of hegemony would continue but with a new group in power.

To restrict multiculturalism, as both a signifier and a movement, to one facet of the illumination of ethnic offerings is to mistake the author for the entire group. Does Daniel Inouye represent all Pacific-Americans? Does Alice Walker represent all African-American women? Certainly, opening up the canon to include authors of diverse race/class/gender groups is a powerful incentive to recognize that members of those groups are eloquent communicators, but to assign those authors the position of social representative ultimately harms such progress. Humanities professor Henry Louis Gates quotes literary historian John Guillory in pointing out that social representation would ultimately lead to affirmation of a lower class, contrary to the principal

stated objectives of public education, just as it leads to affirmations of racial or sexual identity (Gates 35).

Two other works which have drawn considerable attention to defined crises in education are Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s The Disuniting of America and Lynne V. Cheney's Telling the Truth: A Report on the State of the Humanities in Higher Education. Both seek to construct and then describe problems with schools because of the debilitating effects of multiculturalism and a more democratic; student-centered approach to pedagogy. Both books also base their criticism on the dangers of politicizing education while, at the same time, promoting the maintenance of the exclusive status quo, shunning a student-centered approach in favor of a more authoritative and traditional one that closes off student narratives.

Schlesinger's book dazzles with its abundant, indeed constant, referral to documented historical events. He pulls in a wide variety of sources to shore up his claim that ethnic diversity will certainly lead to the destruction of this nation. However, Schlesinger relies on the perception of one grand narrative of history in his description of the weakening of American culture through diversity. He represents the United States as a harmonious blend of cultures combining peacefully and willingly for almost two centuries, only to have such mingling disrupted in the twentieth century with the ramifications of two world wars (14). Schlesinger tries to sidestep this dependence upon a grand narrative by noting the discontent of nonwhite people who were reduced to third-class members of society, but he still maintains that it was a fairly unified society unlike the splintered and splintering one it is today (14). Ironically, Schlesinger dismisses "the cult of ethnicity" as misleading because it binds people forever to their ethnic groups instead of freeing them to assimilate into American culture:

> Implicit in this philosophy is the classification of all Americans according to ethnic and racial criteria. But while the ethnic interpretation of American history, like the economic interpretation, is valid and illuminating up to a point, it is fatally misleading and wrong when presented as the whole picture. The ethnic interpretation, moreover, reverses the history of America as one people--the theory that has thus far managed to keep American society whole. (16)

After cautioning against perceiving ethnic interpretation as "the whole picture," Schlesinger makes the same mistake with his view of a unified history that is not

problematic, only threatened. In other words, he sets up the problem of a rigid, closely defined view of history for each part and then makes the same application to the whole.

One significant danger of Schlesinger's view of a relatively untroubled national culture lies in his observation that the educational system is the one sanctified area that requires a national culture (17). If a defined problem with education in America is that it is designed so that a number of students are excluded from success, then a defense of a unified national culture maintained by education serves only to keep those students excluded. In resisting the pluralistic gestures suggested in the field of education, Schlesinger relies on generalizations to pointing out the destructive qualities of pluralism. Specifically, Schlesinger attempts to align multiculturalism as a single philosophy with radical separatists such as, notably, Leonard Jeffries, who labels those of European descent as cold and aggressive whereas those of African descent are naturally warm and gregarious (67-68). In seeking to establish a sense of alarm in his audience, an audience that will certainly be made up of a number of readers who perceive any change in the national or educational status quo as threatening, Schlesinger expends an abundance of energy confusing appeals to pluralism with radical notions of division. Thus, he doesn't anticipate opposing views so much as he chokes them off.

Although Schlesinger's book is widely read, having spent a number of weeks on the best seller list of the New York Times, Cheney's more obscure pamphlet, Telling the Truth, carries with it the weight of Cheney's title of chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Cheney claims to approach the telling of truth from two angles. Telling the truth about the relatively new weaknesses in many of the nation's universities is the first step to solving the problem. Moreover, telling the truth will seek to dispel the notion that truth is a social construct and consequently return universities to their initial and proper goal--uncovering truth without any influence of a political agenda ("Telling" 6-7). Cheney anticipates the argument from proponents of a pluralistic scholastic setting when she allows that higher education has not been above exclusion of traditionally marginalized groups, and she quickly points out that the National Endowment for the Humanities has provided funding for studies of several ethnic groups and literatures (7). She then launches, however, into a description of higher education that until recently was a source of pride, now brought down by politically-minded humanities professors who use their

classrooms and professional conferences as pulpits from which to promote their own ideologies rather than to uncover the truths compartmentalized within their disciplines. This politicizing of the classroom is a direct result, Cheney says, of professors' view of truth as a cultural construct, a view that opens the door to a variety of interpretations of history, literature, art, and composition theory. It seems to me, though, that while Cheney attempts to privilege an absolute notion of truth, she cannot help reinscribing it as social epistemology.

Cheney mentions that "critical pedagogy" has been used as a mitigated term for what it actually signifies: "politicized teaching." She goes on to misrepresent grossly Donald Lazere's argument that a critical pedagogy is necessary to enable students to question, and ultimately learn about, their existence and position in society. After decontextualizing, or perhaps recontextualizing, Lazere's support for critical pedagogy, Cheney dismisses him, as well as all critical pedagogists it would seem, as a powerful and self-interested authority figure:

> This faculty member is determined to convert his students to his point of view. He has no intention of introducing them to other perspectives. He wants students to embrace his conviction that the United States is a closed and class-ridden society, and he intends to bring them to this realization. (12-13)

No doubt the realization that faculty members are attempting to indoctrinate students with the teachers' own political beliefs is frightening to a significant portion of the population, especially those who are financing the higher education of their impressionable young people. No doubt the realization that at least one of these radical educators is instructing other university faculty members through a professional journal is also unsettling. However, Cheney quotes only small sections of a passage, although she fairly and accurately applies ellipses, before making such a broad generalization of Lazere's pedagogical intent, completely ignoring Lazere's argument for a critical, inquisitive classroom setting. In fact, Lazere defends the notion the instruction of basic skills and factual knowledge as essential to education, even as he espouses a critical, or liberatory, education (9). Only with such education as part of their foundation can students contribute to the conversation of knowledge creation. In fact, Lazere specifically espouses the teaching of remedial instruction in reading and writing standard English as one element in the empowering of students to negotiate academic sources that express

oppositional ideas (19), so he proposes a "back to the basics" approach in order to assist students in their liberatory education.

Cheney quotes Lazere's offer to challenge students' conditioned belief in their freedom of choice by bringing them to awareness of the constrictions in their own class position, thereby leaving the impression that Lazere's principal intent in teaching is to foment dissent among his students. She omits his next clause, however: "constrictions that include their lack of control of academic language and cultural codes" (Lazere 18). Cheney withholds information from the reader in order to force her interpretations upon the reader. It is, apparently, the responsibility of the reader to flip to the back of the book in order to find the citation and secure a copy of the professional journal for a more complete picture of the article. Ironically, Cheney laments the alleged agenda of liberal teachers who use their classrooms to push their beliefs onto their students while she manipulates information, using her forum as chair of the NEH, to bring her argument to her foregone conclusion. Does she then illustrate that no one can avoid promoting an agenda? Cheney also omits a significantly larger portion of the passage:

> Explicit discussion of the problems addressed in this article is one means of raising these issues. Many are contemptuous of the working class, the poor, the minorities, and feminists, and they have little awareness at all of the Third World. Conversely, they idolize the wealthy, whose ranks they dream of joining. Their own biases can be critically examined, under the rhetorical topic of prejudice, through studies of the poor, minorities, women's socio-economic situation, and the Third World peoples on whose exploitation their own comforts depend. (Lazere 18-19)

Although Cheney maneuvers Lazere's work to fit her own presupposition, this passage makes clear that Lazere proposes opening up topics to discussion that may not have previously been part of the students' vocabulary. He wishes to confront the students with these topics, not to coerce the students to accept his own political ideology, but so the students can make informed judgments about these topics rather than remain oblivious to them or to accept the uncritical opinions of their parents or the media. Such a pedagogy contradicts Cheney's legitimation of a pedagogy that dispenses truth in an environment allegedly pure of political motive, and it renders invalid Cheney's claim that Lazere intends to force his students to embrace his view that the United States is a

closed-class society. Lazere's approach is to encourage the students to investigate and challenge such assertions.

Her misrepresentation of Lazere's motives allows Cheney to launch into a relatively brief discussion of the relationship between students and teachers and the degree of academic freedom allowed each. Although faculty members permit themselves the freedom to discuss their own political agendas in class and at professional conferences, so her claim goes, they stifle such freedom in their students. Cheney gives a few examples of students who voiced "politically incorrect" opinions and then were upbraided by their peers, usually with the sanction of the teacher (14-15). These students were subjected to virtual character assassination because their views differed from those of either the majority or from an aggressively vocal minority. However, it seems, based on the evidence that Cheney provides, that these students are not participating in a critical approach to education, one marked by healthy contradiction. Unless such an approach were still in its incipient stages and the students had not yet smoothed their critical rhetorical techniques, these examples illustrate a pedagogy that has externalized a set of values as an indisputable truth and then encouraged students to defend that truth. Although Cheney attacks this particular externally referenced truth as the political ideologies of those faculty members, the problem faced by these students parallels the problem that Cheney, herself, sets in motion with her epistemological orientation.

Two more examples of Cheney's irresponsible scholarship illuminate her massaging of data to conform to her own political ideology. She defends Helen Vendler as a critic of feminist writing who was subsequently vilified as repressed and bigoted by two feminist scholars (27). Cheney refers to the response of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar who defend their work from what they consider an unfair attack by Vendler. Gilbert and Gubar take particular exception to Vendler's lack of documentation in her disparaging review, but Cheney fails to mention that facet of the exchange. Rather than reduce Gilbert and Gubar's entire article to a charge of repression and bigotry, Cheney could have cited another important contention:

> Helen Vendler's review essay...is so vitriolic, so contradictory, and so undocumented in its representation of feminist literary criticism that even a disinterested reader would be surprised at its intellectual and rhetorical lapses. (Gilbert, Gubar 58)

This passage foregrounds the response as a serious effort at argumentation, one that challenges the opposition to provide some indication of cohesion and serious research rather than a reliance on initial reaction. True, Gilbert and Gubar accuse Vendler of repression because she refuses to accept the ideological baggage of all literature (58), but we might argue that Vendler leaves herself open to such a charge with her dismissal of the social underpinnings of literature (Vendler 19). Gilbert and Gubar seek to keep alive the debate in which Vendler is a willing participant but which Cheney seeks to close and to distort in order to fulfill her own assertions.

Cheney also alludes to Daphne Patai's problems with critically analyzing feminism at the risk of retarding any advancement that feminism is making. Cheney describes Patai as a victim of the "new dogma" that disallows any disparaging comments about feminism and that stereotypes traditionally marginalized groups, especially women of color, as inherently good and traditionally dominant groups as inherently bad (46). Patai does, indeed, lament such a dogma, but she puts the blame for such an intolerant attitude on the closing off of argument (Patai B2). Cheney seeks to decry the stifling of argument even as she attempts to stifle the argument about universities' political role. Likewise, Cheney belittles the stereotyping of members of ethnic groups even as she generalizes the many political movements of the universities.

The book ends with an illustration of an academic in Czechoslovakia who, because of Communist rule, was forced to work manual labor until he secured a sufficient degree of freedom to participate in academia without threat of persecution. He contends that the mission of the university is to lead students to the light, to help them discover a truth that is above us all, not we above it (51). Cheney closes with this example of a person who had the wherewithal to withstand oppression from an authority figure and seek the platonic idea of truth. This is a metaphor that exemplifies her desire for students to resist the oppression from their politically-laden college classes and seek external truths despite their teachers' social epistemology. The metaphor would work wonderfully but for the glaring inconsistencies with Cheney's own message. She presents her findings as an attack on the political agendas of teachers, yet this report has a clear political agenda--to uphold the principles of a conservative administration and shun teaching methods that would wrest power from the hegemony and grant it to a much wider population of students.

To view all of education as the quest for transcendental truth is to continue excluding a significant number of students whose own contributions to knowledge making are silenced.

In a report that purports to uncover truth and to tell it in the unadulterated form in which it has been found, Cheney's work seems fashioned to serve as a metaphor for her ideal pedagogy for teaching in higher education. She disparages those who would coerce their views on their audiences, especially those audiences who by virtue of their position wield less power than the teachers, and favors instead a pedagogy that asks the teacher to serve as the leader in the quest for an externally referenced truth. Ultimately, however, her effort fails as she recreates through her work the very gestures she so vehemently opposes: manipulating the academic conversation to suit individual political agenda and representing personal views as truth rather than facilitating the audience's opportunities to discover any sense of truth. Her misrepresentation of that data which do not support her conclusions is more egregious than the political posturing with which she charges many educators because teachers who practice a critical pedagogy open up opportunities for their students to challenge any assertions made in class, whereas Cheney offers no such encouragement.

Cheney's agenda is to prescribe a canon that is legitimated as truth and to exclude those narratives that do not find a place in that canon; it is, much like Bloom's agenda, a movement to maintain a collection of materials that, although ostensibly available to all, is actually fashioned to perpetuate the existing social structure, with its inequities, and to cater to the traditionally dominate group (Aronowitz, Giroux 26). For example, Cheney's suggestions for a core curriculum in the humanities in 50 Hours: a Core Curriculum for College Students is offered as a cure for the universities' academic demise. One purpose of this report is to point out gaps in the education of an alarming number of university students who attend schools that do not require certain texts that Cheney deems virtually requisite to cultural literacy. As Graff says in Beyond the Culture Wars, Cheney favors a moot approach to humanities that "once put generations of students to sleep (52). She espouses a core curriculum as a means to "ensure that students have opportunities to know the literature, philosophy, institutions, and art of our own and other cultures" (11), expressing "our" culture as a single, uniform entity. Earlier, though, she offers as an illustration of educational deficiency the statistic that it was possible to

graduate from "45 percent [of the nation's colleges] without taking a course in American or English literature" (7). There's an obvious reliance on the linear progression from English history and literature to American history and literature with little or no consideration, it is apparent, for other cultures who have contributed to the many narratives that make up contemporary America.

In his review of The Closing of the American Mind, Richard Wright notes the importance of keeping open the potential for debate in order to learn about issues (224). Daphne Patai and Donald Lazere make the same argument in the pieces alluded to in this chapter. Such an interest in an ongoing debate as a vehicle for learning rejects the teleological approach of the disseminating of information represented as the absolute truth, an approach that does not tolerate the questioning of that truth and the critical inquiry resulting from that questioning. It is imperative, then, to examine some of those views that reject gestures of pluralism in education in order to perpetuate the conversation and, thereby, create opportunities to make informed ideological choices. I certainly don't mean to imply that we can keep from promoting our agenda in our presentations and in our profession--indeed, this paper is an example--but let's at least recognize that inability.

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